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ABSTRACT

Peer evaluation of writing, or conferencing, is a helping process in which the teacher or other students receive and respond to the writer's work. It promotes the writer's sense of ownership of the work and thus helps develop writing skills. A writing program that includes peer evaluation, then, is one that provides a setting in which the young writer can flourish. The key to the success of conferencing lies in the teacher's initial modelling of the process. This modelling requires great commitment to, and understanding of, the principles upon which conferencing and the entire writing program are based. The conferencing method is best implemented when the teacher or peers show respect for the writer's process and product. Conferencing helps develop the skills for receiving the author's work and reflecting on it so the writer can profit by the use of a sounding board--a real, responding audience. Furthermore, it encourages peers to respond as true readers would, thus helping them develop a sense of which parts to assist the writer in improving at the time. This process allows the writer to develop a communication sense in an accepting atmosphere. Therein lies the beauty of the conferencing method. Children learn to write by writing and by adjusting their perceptions of their writing with the aid of audience response. (HOD)

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Establishing Peer Evaluation of Writing: Students Need an Informed Teacher Model

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The use of peer evaluation in the teaching of writing is an idea which has been increasingly supported in recent years. It plays a major role in approaches which make use of conferencing, such as that proposed by Donald Graves (1983). Though peer evaluation offers many advantages, it must be implemented gradually, and with care. Teachers must be well versed in recent findings on evaluating student writing, which may be crucial in enabling them to establish this method.

Graves, in his recent book Writing: Teachers & Children At Work (1983), presents a complete program for writing instruction in the elementary school. He emphasizes giving students maximum control over their own writing and respecting each child's individual process. This is carried through to classroom publication. The heart of this process is the conference, a helping process in which the teacher or other students receive and respond to the writer's work. Thus, children develop skill in written expression as a result of "ownership" of their work, and the feedback of a responsive audience.

This method allows for an increasing amount of student initiative in evaluating the writing of peers, and the teacher's role gradually becomes less focal, more that of a facilitator than a leader. Murray (1968) has said that a teacher "is most successful when the students have become their own teachers" (p. 133). Children's writing best develops when they are given the freedom to control their own process. A writing program which includes peer evaluation provides a setting in which young writers can flourish.

Employing peer evaluation in teaching writing can provide several clear benefits. First, it provides a more varied, appro-

priate audience for the writer, than is the case when children constantly write for the teacher. Second, it gives students-- both writers and evaluators-- a valuable chance to work through, and talk through, the various processes involved in topic selection, composition, and revision. It may also improve relationships among peers as they work together in a cooperative setting (Beaven, 1977).

Clearly, peer evaluation can have its advantages, and Graves makes this clear. His program is carefully detailed and concrete examples are plentiful. Still, some teachers may have a hard time establishing this program in their classrooms. Russell (1983), a sixth grade teacher, mentions her initial "skepticism" upon first hearing of the concepts of "ownership" and "conferencing." Before successfully employing this approach, she notes that it was necessary to make "a fundamental change in my philosophy of teaching" (p. 334). Her reactions may well be representative of those of many teachers.

All teachers find themselves hampered, to some degree, by a variety of constraints which often prevent them from improving instruction. Lack of time, information, or experience, as well as the pressures of accountability may all take their toll on instructors. Moreover, the integration of theory or research with actual practice is often a complex proposition. This is no doubt part of the reason teachers hesitate to employ peer evaluation, in a program such as Graves advocates.

In addition, developing peer evaluation skills in students is a long-term process. Students will, at first, be unable to give as specific, insightful feedback as they will once they gain experience in receiving their peers' work. But teachers may well be

hesitant to embark on a program which will progress very slowly at first. This, of course, is more an indictment of our educational system than of teachers per se. From a Piagetian perspective, quality of development, rather than speed of development, is of crucial importance. Piaget has argued that time gained in rushing children's learning may actually be time lost when the child's depth of understanding is considered (Hall, 1970).

Patience is a virtue which, all too often, has been ruthlessly usurped from the classroom teacher. Yet patience is critical if children are to learn to conference, and to evaluate the writing of their peers. Merely giving students access to each other's work will not lead to successful evaluation. At best, students will have only global responses ("I like it"; "that's good"); at worst, discouragement of the writer through inappropriate responses may occur. The key to the success of conferencing lies in the initial modelling of the process by the teacher. This requires great commitment to, and understanding of, the principles upon which conferencing, and the entire writing program, are based.

These principles are numerous, many having been uncovered during the rapid increase in research and professional articles pertaining to writing, in recent years. This sudden tide of information may pose a problem to teachers attempting to reconcile it all with their previous notions about teaching writing. It requires an abrupt about-face to reverse the teacher's control of the process, from topic choice to red-pencil "correction." Not surprisingly, this is a tall order for teachers, especially given the aforementioned constraints.

The latest advances in teaching writing are largely implicit

in Writing: Teachers and Children At Work. But for teachers attempting to implement a program such as Graves suggests, an explicit grasp of the rationale may be crucial. Teachers must make a difficult commitment of time and energy in order to set the peer evaluation process in motion. Firm knowledge and understanding of the reasons for undertaking this task may be the critical factor in teachers' success or failure.

Peer evaluation as employed in conferencing is not evaluation in the sense of grading, though peers evaluate the work in the broad sense of the term by receiving and reacting to it. The teacher must serve, at first, as a model for students learning this process. Teachers' understanding of the most effective ways of responding to children's writing will come through at this time. This is why teachers must have the most recent findings in this area at their disposal.

One recent finding which stands out prominently is that of Searle and Dillon (1980), regarding teacher response to student writing. They found that, in the 4th-6th grade classes they studied, 86% of teachers' comments related to mechanics (spelling, punctuation, etc.), while less than five percent of comments dealt with content!

This shows that, even in the present decade, many teachers are overly concerned with the form of student writing, rather than what students are trying to say. Hillerich (1979) and Koch (1982) are just two of many professionals who have lashed out at what Koch has termed this "bushwhacker mentality" (p. 469). Hillerich points out that, in this manner, what students are actually learning is to keep their words and sentences short and simple. Naturally, this

was confirmed by the national assessment in written expression, which found the best writing of high school students basically sound but extremely simple (Education Commission of the States, 1972).

For teachers who have, in the past, collected and "corrected" student writing, a massive change in philosophy is required. This has only occurred when teachers allow students to control their own writing process. Graves (1983) identifies writing as a craft, within which each writer-craftsperson must be allowed his or her own creative process, undisturbed by fear of rejection.

This is not to say, however, that the child should be left to struggle alone. The conferencing process, as described by Graves, is implemented properly when the teacher or peers show respect for the writer's process and product. They also develop the skill to receive the author's work, and reflect it so the writer can profit by the use of a sounding board-- a real, responding audience. Furthermore, peers develop a sense for which parts to assist the writer in improving at the time, by responding as a true reader would. This allows the writer to develop a communication sense in an accepting atmosphere. The teacher models respect for the writer's work, and responds only in ways which help the writer improve his or her own basic process.

Mistakes have usually been a sign of stupidity, laziness, and failure to most teachers. Kantor (1979) sees mistakes as a positive occurrence, signifying growth in the writer. He insists on looking at the positive side in evaluating writing, and research supports his stance. Hillerich (1971) is one researcher who has found that children wrote better when praised, rather than critized.

They wrote more, were more creative, enjoyed writing more, and made fewer mechanical errors. This way of approaching writing evaluation provides a benevolent environment in which young writers feel free to take chances, with the result being their rapid growth in writing proficiency. Kantor points out that, rather than scouring children's work for errors, teachers should appreciate whatever good qualities are demonstrated, and make this known to students. Obviously, children's work will not be perfect, but he refers to this writing as "transitional", viewing their experimentation as resulting in errors to be corrected gradually, and in important achievements to be applauded.

Lest this be misunderstood, however, it should be kept in mind that praise must be genuine. Children will quickly see through insincerity, so only true quality should be complimented. This should depend on the present level of progress in the child's writing. In addition, any comments regarding student writing should be positive, in the sense of specifying what is to be done (Tripp, 1978). They should also be specific, as this will be of most use to the writer. These requirements are a normal part of responding as a real reader, which writing evaluation demands (Searle & Dillon, 1980).

The real reader does not emphasize form over content or try to take control of the writer's work. The real reader, as the effective peer evaluator must become, learns to respond in ways which encourage and respect the writer. Koch (1982) emphasizes that the teacher or peer evaluator needs to develop an identification with the writer's work. He urges evaluators to strive for a personal, meaningful understanding of writing.

Koch goes on to propose a four-level sequence of response to children's writing, which begins with positive, identifying res-

ponses and progresses to questions and suggestions for improvement. This sequence provides a framework for initial conferencing, and helps the teacher establish what is valued in writing. Teachers can also demonstrate valuing of the writing process by writing with the children, as Graves (1983) suggests. The teacher's overall method of receiving and responding to children's writing will say much about what they consider important in this area, and will set the tone for children's evaluation of their peers' work.

Learning to conference effectively will take a great deal of time and effort. Once established, however, children can begin to reap the benefits of controlling their own learning, developing feelings of ownership, interest, and self-efficacy which are crucial to real progress. Teachers must thus be patient with the initial stages of the conferencing process.

Indeed, writing itself is an ever expanding, changing process in which growth in skill can always occur. Probably the most prevalent fallacy about teaching writing is that it can actually be "taught" directly. Teachers need to realize that teaching mechanics simply does not equal teaching writing. Certainly, teachers (and peers) can assist children in improving their writing skills. However, only when children have control of their writing process and feel secure enough to express themselves freely can real growth occur.

Therein lies the beauty of the conferencing method. Children learn to write by writing and by adjusting their perceptions of their writing with the aid of an audience's responses. Writing is an act of communication. When a child writes for his or her peers, a real message is being conveyed. And when the writer expresses thoughts honestly, he or she deserves nothing less than a thoughtful,

honest response. Learning to provide this response is the key to a successful writing program, for both the teacher and peer evaluators.

Hopefully, with a firm understanding of the recent advances in writing evaluation, teachers will begin to implement peer evaluation, through conferencing in their classrooms. With a firmer grasp of the reasons for doing so, teachers will be able to place increased responsibility for learning in children's hands, and assume the less central, though crucial role of facilitator. Viewing writing from this new perspective, teachers will be in a better position to see children becoming confident, skillful writers.

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